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ABSTRACT

This summary presents data from seven papers based on six different data sets (three national and three local). Data were collected for different purposes, in different years and places, using different interview techniques. Overall, nearly one in five adolescents has had sex before his/her 15th birthday. In early adolescence, being sexually experienced does not necessarily mean that young adolescents are having sex regularly. Contraceptive use among young adolescents is relatively low, and one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls has been pregnant. Many young adolescents report dating or being in romantic relationships, sometimes with older partners. Dating in general, and dating some older in particular, greatly increase the chances of having sex. Many young adolescents experience pressure to have sex. Sexually experienced young adolescents are also engaging in other risky behaviors. Data do not shed much light on the extent to which young adolescents are engaging in oral sex and other sexual behavior. Young adolescents do not seem to know a lot about sex. Parents and youths give mixed reports about family communication about sex and seem to have misperceptions about each others' attitudes and behaviors. Many young adolescents have ample opportunities to have sex, and many report willingness to have sex. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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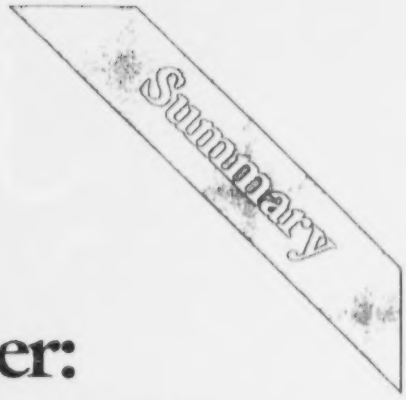

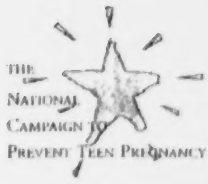

14 and Younger:

The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents

The complete, seven-chapter publication from which this summary is drawn presents new analyses from seven teams of investigators

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As the title page shows clearly, many authors were involved in this project. We thank them all warmly and sincerely for completing their papers on time and tolerating endless questions and edits. We thank the members of the Campaign's Effective Programs and Research Task Force for their keen insights and helpful advice, as well as many Campaign staffers and friends for offering suggestions about numerous earlier drafts of this publication. Anne Brown Rodgers, in particular, helped a great deal through her thorough review and edit of these papers.

Finally, we recognize the unique contributions of staff member Christine Flanigan, the Campaign's research analyst, who not only capably authored one of the chapters in this volume, but also carefully shepherded this entire project from start to finish with grace and determination. In addition, special thanks go to Bill Albert, the Campaign's Director of Communications and Publications, who spent countless hours refining these papers and helping to make them fully accessible to a broad audience. We simply could not have completed this project without his steady, competent guidance.

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This summary and the papers in the full volume of *14 and Younger* were developed and reviewed under the auspices of this Task Force. The conclusions, however, are those of the authors and the National Campaign itself.

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Note to Readers

This summary is based on the seven-chapter publication, *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*. The full report contains seven papers based on six different data sets — three national and three local — presenting new analyses from seven teams of investigators. The complete publication, which also includes this summary, can be purchased through the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's website, www.teenpregnancy.org.

Summary

14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents

Why Care About Sexual Activity Among Young Teenagers?

While most adults prefer that teens under age 18 not have sex, consensus is even stronger for "middle school" youth — those age 14 and younger (Moore & Stief, 1991). There is good reason to be especially concerned about sexual activity among these very young adolescents.

- While the proportion of unmarried teen girls age 15-19 who have had sexual intercourse decreased between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of unmarried teen girls who have had sexual intercourse at 14 and younger increased appreciably during the same time period (Terry & Manlove, 2000).
- Compared to delayed sexual activity, early sexual activity has been linked to a greater number of sexual partners over time and an increased risk of both teen pregnancy (Kirby, 2001) and sexually transmitted diseases (Miller, Cain, Rogers, Gribble, & Turner, 1999).
- A recent national survey found that the younger a girl was the first time she had sex, the more likely it was to have been unwanted (Moore, Driscoll, & Lindberg, 1998).

- A 2002 public opinion poll found that 81% of sexually experienced youth age 12-14 wish they had waited longer to have sex, compared to 55% of sexually experienced 15- to 19-year-olds (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002).
- Children born to girls 14 and younger are more likely than children born to older teens to have health problems — in 2000, for example, 14% of births to girls age 10-14 were low birth weight, compared to 10% of births to girls 15-19 (and 8% of births to women 20-24) (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Menacker, & Park, 2002).
- There is no question that the parenting skills of very young teens are highly limited, although their efforts are often supplemented and supported by older relatives and friends.
- An appreciable amount of sexual activity among youth aged 14 and younger runs afoul of state age of consent laws. The age of consent ranges from 14 to 18 years of age; in more than half of the states, the age of consent is 16 (Donovan, 1997).

Oddly, given the many risks and concerns about sexual activity among young adolescents, there actually is very little published information available on this topic. Furthermore, most of the major data sets used to calculate teen sexual activity have important limitations when examining young adolescents. For example, one of the most widely quoted surveys that addresses adolescent sexual behavior — the Youth Risk Behavior Survey — collects data only from high-school-age youth, the vast majority of whom are at least 15 years old.

Given that so little is known about early sexual activity, given its sobering implications, and given the numerous media reports of the past several years speculating on the sexual behavior of young teens, the National Campaign, in partnership with the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, convened an invitational seminar of experts in 2001 to discuss various sex- and pregnancy-related issues among middle-school age youth. One major recommendation of that conference was that the National Campaign commission several new analyses of various existing data sets that have information on young teens in order to help increase our understanding of the sexual behavior and relationships of adolescents 14 and younger. The

Campaign acted on that recommendation, and the results are in this report. Both the conference and the analyses reported here were made possible, in large part, by generous financial support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

The full report on which this summary is based contains seven papers based on six different data sets — three national and three local ones. These data were collected for different purposes, in different years and places (school, home), and using different interview techniques (self- and interviewer-administered). The surveys also used different methods of gathering data on youth aged 12-14, surveying 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds at the same time; surveying a group of 12-year-olds and then following them over time as they turned 13 and 14; and surveying older teens about their experiences when age 14 and younger. These differences are important and care must be taken in pooling results or making comparisons across different data sets. For example, a survey asking teens 15 and older about earlier experiences can, in theory, capture quite complete data on behavior occurring at ages 14 and younger. But surveys where youth are age 12-14 at the time of interview will necessarily miss some behavior that occurs in the 14th year of life but after the time of the interview, unless a "life table" analytic approach is used, as is the case for a few specific variables in the papers based on national data sets. These technical issues are taken up in detail in the individual papers.

Nonetheless, it is striking that on some of the most basic markers of sexual activity there is a high degree of uniformity — especially among the nationally representative data sets — and a surprisingly consistent picture emerges of sexual relationships and activity among very young teens.

Section one of the full report contains three papers derived from nationally representative samples of teens.

- Chapter One, by Elizabeth Terry-Humen and Jennifer Manlove, uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), a survey of youths' transition from school to work.
- Chapter Two, by Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman, uses data collected between 1994 and 1996 through the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a large

survey of teens and their parents and schools that examined many aspects of adolescent health.

- Chapter Three, by Christine Flanigan, uses data from the Cycle V of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG 1995), a fertility survey of females age 15-44, which includes retrospective reports of sexual activity before age 15.

Boxes on the first page of each of these three papers provide summary data on the percentages of youth in that sample who have had sexual intercourse, used contraception at first sex, and have been pregnant, in order to assist readers in making comparisons across these three national analyses.

Section two of the full report contains four separate papers based on three small area, more local samples that are ***not*** nationally representative. The disadvantage to using such data is that one can't necessarily assume that the attitudes and behavior of youth presented in these papers are representative of U.S. youth as a whole. In addition, these local data sets are more subject to possible selection bias than the national data sets (that is, sample participants are not necessarily representative of the population of all possible participants). On the other hand, all of these surveys focused sharply on HIV/teen pregnancy prevention and therefore included questions on a number of issues that were not covered in the more broadly focused national surveys.

- Chapter Four, by Cynthia Gómez and colleagues, describes adolescents' sexual attitudes and beliefs, and how they change between ages 12 and 14. It is one of two papers in this volume that are based on an evaluation of the Draw the Line/Respect the Line (1997-2000) program in a community in northern California. Unlike the three national surveys, this data set contains extensive information about young adolescents' attitudes and beliefs regarding sex.
- Chapter Five, by Barbara Marín and colleagues, is the second paper based on the Draw the Line/Respect the Line evaluation and focuses on age differences between young teens and their partners.
- Chapter Six, by Susan Philliber, is based on data collected (1999) throughout California as part of an evaluation of a statewide teen

pregnancy prevention effort funded by the California Wellness Foundation. This study was especially valuable because it asked many questions about attitudes toward and experience with parent-child communication about sex. Because the questions were asked of both adolescents and a parent, Philliber's analysis is able to show differences in attitudes and reporting of past parent-child communication within families on various topics related to sex and relationships.

- Chapter Seven, by Susan Philliber and Michael Carerra, is based on data collected (1996-1997) in seven cities as part of an evaluation of the Children's Aid Society (CAS)-Carrera program. It is one of the few surveys that have asked youth in this age group about oral and anal sex. Such data are important because there is some concern — and some evidence — that adolescents are increasingly engaged in such behaviors (Remez, 2000). Philliber and Carrera's analysis of this data is also important because it provides information on sexual activity and related behavior among some of the nation's most disadvantaged youth.

Results

Below, some of the headline findings from the seven papers are summarized. Information from the three nationally representative data sets is presented first, generally followed by selected information from the smaller area data sets. Remember that these more local data do not represent overall national statistics, and should therefore not be given the same weight. They were included mainly to provide additional texture and context.

Nearly one in five adolescents has had sex before his or her 15th birthday.

The National Picture

Estimates from the three nationally representative data sets of the proportion of youth who have had sex at age 14 or younger are remarkably similar. Overall, these data indicate that 18-19% of youth have had sexual intercourse at age 14 or younger. Percentages increase with age — at age 12, 4-5% have had sex, increasing to 10% at age 13, and 18-19% at age 14. Boys are more likely than girls to

have had sex at an early age. At age 12, 2-4% of girls and 6-8% of boys were sexually experienced. At age 14, 14-20% of girls and 20-22% of boys were sexually experienced. It is important to add that each of these surveys approached this issue and question in a somewhat different way, as detailed in the papers that follow this summary. Nonetheless, these three separate data sets all indicate that approximately one in five youth have had sex by his or her 15th birthday.

Proportion of Teens Who Have Had Sex at Age 14 and Younger, 3 Nationally-Representative Data Sets

	Male	Female	Total
NLSY ('97)	22%	17%	19%
Add Health ('94-'96)	20%	14%	18%
NSFG ('95)	—	20%	—

Additional Information from Local Data

The proportion of sexually experienced youth in the local data sets varies widely. For example, 27% of 14-year-olds in the CAS-Carrera data set were sexually experienced, which is quite a bit higher than the national average. On the other hand, youth in the California Wellness Foundation data set had lower than average levels of sexual experience — overall 9% of 14-year-olds in this sample had ever had sex.

In early adolescence, being sexually experienced doesn't necessarily mean that young adolescents are having sex regularly.

The National Picture

For many youth age 14 and younger, sexual activity is quite sporadic. For example, four out of ten of those surveyed by Add Health who reported being sexually experienced had not had sex at all in the 18 months before the survey. Of those who had had sex in the previous 18 months, over half reported only one sexual partner during that same time period. According to the NLSY97, half of sexually experienced 14-year-olds had had sex 0-2 times in the previous year.

Contraceptive use among young adolescents is relatively low. Given that fact, it's not surprising that approximately one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls report having been pregnant.

The National Picture

Reports of contraceptive use at first sex varied among the three national surveys from 57% to 74%. Two of the nationally representative surveys asked which method was used at first sex, and found that condoms were overwhelmingly the method most often used.

The Add Health paper — the only paper with data on contraceptive use by age at first sex — reports that the likelihood of using contraception at first sex increases dramatically as age at first sex increases.

Among 12-14-year-olds in the Add Health survey, 54% of girls and 66% of boys said they used some form of contraception the ***most recent*** time (as distinguished from the ***first*** time) they had sex. Three-quarters of all youth in this survey who used contraception at most recent sex used condoms, and the vast majority of the remaining adolescents who used contraception used such relatively ineffective methods as withdrawal and rhythm.

Because most girls age 14 and younger have not had sex, their ***overall*** pregnancy rate is low (for example, in 1997, the overall pregnancy rate for 14-year-olds was 12.2 per 1,000, compared to 147.8 per 1,000 for girls age 18-19 (Henshaw, 2001)). However, when one looks at pregnancy just among ***sexually experienced*** girls, the story is quite different. According to two of the three nationally representative data sets discussed in this volume, 13-15% of sexually experienced 14-year-old girls (about one in seven) report having been pregnant. (Add Health was not used to examine this outcome because it uses a method of calculating pregnancy rates that is not comparable to the other two data sets.)

Additional Information from Local Data

The Draw the Line survey contained several questions measuring youths' attitudes toward condoms. Many young adolescents (girls more than boys) expressed embarrassment about buying and carrying

Sexual Experience

- Approximately one in five adolescents has had sexual intercourse before his or her 15th birthday.
- Boys age 14 and younger are slightly more likely to have had sex than girls the same age.

Frequency of Sex

- A substantial proportion of teens age 14 and younger who have had sex are not currently sexually active.
- According to one of the national surveys (NLSY), approximately half of sexually experienced 14-year-olds have had sex 0-2 times in the past 12 months.

Contraceptive Use

- Between half and three-quarters of youth age 12-14 report that they used contraception the first time they had sex.
- Slightly more than half of girls age 12-14 and about two thirds of boys say they used some form of contraception the most recent time they had sex.

Pregnancy

- Approximately one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls reports having been pregnant.

Dating

- A significant proportion of those age 12-14 report having been on a date (two-fifths in the NLSY survey) or having a romantic relationship in the past 18 months (half in Add Health).

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- Significant minorities of youth age 14 and under report a romantic relationship with someone three or more years older (girls far more than boys).
- Relationships with a significantly older partner — compared with those with someone only slightly older, the same age, or younger — are much more likely to be sexual.

Pressure

- More than one in ten girls who first have had sex before age 15 describe it as non-voluntary and many more describe it as relatively unwanted.

Other Risky Behavior

- Sexually experienced youth age 14 and younger are much more likely to smoke, use drugs and alcohol, and participate in delinquent activities than youth who have not had sex.

Parents

- In general, parents report talking a moderate amount with their children age 12-14 about sex and related issues, although their children recall less communication than the parents claim.
- Parents are more likely to have spoken with their daughters than with their sons about sex and related issues.
- Parents tend to be unaware of what their children are actually doing sexually — only about a third of parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds know that their child has had sex.

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condoms, although these feelings decreased as the young people grew older. For example, the proportion of girls who said they would be embarrassed to buy condoms decreased from 69% of 12-year-olds to 53% of 14-year-olds; comparable percentages for boys were 58% at age 12 and 39% at age 14. About half of the 14-year-olds surveyed thought incorrectly it was against the law for people under 16 years old to buy condoms. For both boys and girls, about half of 12-year-olds and a quarter of 14-year-olds said they would be embarrassed to talk to a partner about using condoms.

The only survey that asked *boys* about pregnancy was the CAS-Carrera data set. In that survey, 1% of boys said they had caused a pregnancy, and another 7% thought they might have but weren't sure.

Many youth in this age group reported dating or being in romantic relationships, sometimes with older partners. Both dating, in general, and dating someone older, in particular, greatly increased the chances of having sex.

The National Picture

The three nationally representative surveys each defined romantic relationships differently. The NLSY97 asked about dating (defined as an unsupervised social outing) and found that 42% of youth age 12-14 had been on a date. Among those who had dated, dating was fairly sporadic — more than half reported either not dating at all in the previous year or only a few times. Add Health, on the other hand, asked about "romantic relationships," (defined as holding hands, telling the partner that he/she liked or loved him/her, etc.) and found that 50% of those age 12-14 reported having been in a romantic relationship in the past 18 months. For 12-year-olds only, the figure was 39%. The NSFG survey did not ask about dating, per se, but did ask about relationships with *sexual* partners — 81% of girls who first had voluntary sex[a] at age 14 or younger were dating that partner

a The NSFG questionnaire was designed to permit the identification of sexual abuse and other nonvoluntary first sexual experiences. Because questions about partner and relationship characteristics were not asked about nonvoluntary sexual experiences, much of the NSFG analysis in this report focuses on voluntary sex only. In addition to ascertaining whether first sex was voluntary or nonvoluntary, respondents were also asked to rate on a scale of one to 10 how much they wanted to have sex at that time; individuals who indicated that sex was relatively unwanted, but was nonetheless voluntary, *are* included.

(dating occasionally or "going steady") when the couple began having sex.

The vast majority of young adolescent relationships are with someone of the same or similar age. Nevertheless, significant minorities of young adolescents report dating someone three or more years older. For example, in the Add Health data set, 12% of all romantic relationships reported by youth age 12-14 were with someone three or more years older. And 12% were with someone two or more years older. Girls were more likely to report older romantic partners — 1% of relationships reported by boys were with someone 3 or more years older, compared to 11% of relationships reported by girls.

Romantic relationships with older partners were much more likely to include intercourse — 13% of relationships between same age partners included intercourse, compared to 26% of relationships with a partner who was 2 years older, 33% of relationships with a partner who was 3 years older, and 47% of relationships with a partner who was 4 or more years older. In the NSFG, only 8% of girls who first had voluntary sex at age 14 or younger did so with a partner who was the same age or younger, compared to 24% of girls who first had sex at age 15 or older. One in six girls who had voluntary sex at age 14 or younger reported that her first partner was 5 or more years older.

Add Health also makes clear that, overall, the romantic relationships of young adolescents are of relatively short duration. For example, 25% of relationships among youth age 12-14 ended after 3 months, 50% ended after 6 months, and 75% ended after 15 months. On the other hand, *sexual* romantic relationships in this age group tended to be of longer durations than non-sexual ones; a quarter lasted two years or longer. Over a quarter of sexually experienced youth age 12-14 (27%) also reported multiple recent sexual partners in the past 18 months, which implies, among other things, an increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Additional Information from Local Data

The Draw the Line survey also found an association between early sexual activity and dating someone older. Among 14-year-olds, 30% of girls and 73% of boys whose oldest "serious boyfriend or girl-

friend" was 2 or more years older were sexually experienced, compared to 13% of girls and 29% of boys whose oldest partner was no more than one year older. This analysis went a step beyond simply establishing this association to explore possible reasons *why* having an older boyfriend or girlfriend might be linked to an increased probability of having sex. The authors found that having an older partner is associated with greater opportunities for sex, with having friends who are sexually experienced, with more interest in having sex, and with experiencing more sexual pressure (possibly from the older partner, possibly someone else). Of course, it may also be that certain teens seek out older partners, so that precise direction of causation is not clear.

Many young adolescents experience pressure to have sex.

The National Picture

Thirteen percent of girls in the NSFG who first had sex at age 14 or younger described it as nonvoluntary, clearly a cause for great concern. Even among those who classified their first sexual experience as voluntary, girls who had sex at age 14 or younger were significantly more likely to say that it was relatively unwanted, compared to girls who had sex for the first time at age 15 or older.

Additional Information from Local Data

The Draw the Line survey asked several questions about sexual pressure and coercion, including attitudes toward the acceptability of pressuring a partner and experiences with pressure and coercion. In this survey, 6% of boys and 5% of girls reported that they had been forced to have sex. The proportion of youth who said that someone had ***tried*** to force them to have sex in the previous year when they didn't want to increased from 5-7% for 12-year-olds to 14-16% for 14-year-olds. The proportion of youth who said that ***they*** had tried to have sex in the previous year with someone who didn't want to was much lower, 1% for girls and 5% for boys.

The questions in Draw the Line about the acceptability of sexual pressure found that a substantial proportion of youth feel it's "okay"

for someone to pressure a partner for sex if the couple has had sex before. Boys were much more likely to think so than girls: for example, 34% of boys thought it would be okay for a boy to pressure a girl to have sex if they had had sex before, while only 14% of girls thought that such pressure would be okay. Boys were more likely to agree that it is okay for a girl to pressure for sex than for a boy to pressure (34% agreed that it is okay for boys to pressure vs. 42% who agreed that it is okay for girls to pressure). Girls, on the other hand, were equally as likely to agree that either boys or girls can pressure a partner for sex (14% said it is okay for boys to pressure and 15% said it is okay for girls to pressure).

Sexually experienced young adolescents are also engaging in other risky behavior.

The National Picture

According to the Add Health survey, sexually experienced youth age 12-14 were much more likely to also smoke, use drugs and alcohol, and participate in delinquent activities than youth who had not had sex. For example, nearly 1 in 5 sexually experienced youth (18%) reported drinking regularly, compared to only 3% of virgins. Similarly, 29% of sexually experienced youth reported having ever smoked regularly and 43% have tried marijuana; comparable percentages for virgins were 8% and 10%. Ninety percent of sexually experienced youth reported participating in one of 15 types of delinquent behavior (such as shoplifting and fighting) in the previous year, compared to 69% of virgins.

The Add Health paper also includes findings about the association between alcohol and sexual activity. Seven percent of youth used alcohol the first time they had sex, and 6% used alcohol the most recent time they had sex. Alcohol use was not associated with decreased contraceptive use at *first* sex, but it was at *most recent* sex; 45% of those who drank at the time of most recent sex used contraception, compared to 62% of those who did not drink. In addition, 17% of girls and 11% of boys age 14 and younger said that, because of alcohol, they had been in a sexual situation they later regretted.

These data sets do not shed much light on the extent to which young adolescents are engaging in oral sex and other sexual behavior.

The National Picture

In the Add Health survey, 12% of virgins age 12-14 reported that a relationship in the past 18 months included "touching under clothes," and 6% of virgins age 12-14 reported that touching genitals occurred within at least one of their recent romantic relationships. But neither Add Health nor the other two nationally representative surveys included questions ***specifically*** asking youth age 14 and under about oral and anal sex. Numerous recent media reports have suggested that teens — including young adolescents — are increasingly having oral and/or anal sex, perhaps as a substitute for vaginal intercourse. The three nationally representative data sets described here do not shed any light on whether this is the case or not.

Additional Information from Local Data

In the CAS-Carrera dataset, 3% of youth age 12-14 reported having had oral or anal sex but not vaginal intercourse. By contrast, 7% of youth who reported having vaginal sex also reported oral or anal sex. It should be noted, however, that this data set does not make clear the sequence of behavior. For example, some of the youth in the data set may have engaged in oral and/or anal sex before or after having vaginal intercourse; for others, these actions may have occurred later.

Young adolescents don't seem to know a lot about sex.

The National Picture

Ninety percent of youth age 12-14 reported learning about HIV/AIDS in school, while 81% said they had learned about pregnancy in school, according to Add Health. Note that these percentages are higher than a 1999 survey of teachers, in which about two-thirds said that sex education was taught in grades 6, 7, and 8 in their school (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000; Landry, Singh, & Darroch, 2000).

However, despite such education, basic knowledge about reproductive biology and contraceptive methods was poor, at least among 13-year-olds surveyed by the NLSY97. For example, among the options of withdrawal, condoms, and the pill, less than a third of 13-year-olds was able to identify the most effective pregnancy prevention method (the pill), and only two-thirds were able to identify the most effective STD prevention method (condoms). Only 8% correctly identified the point in the female fertility cycle when pregnancy is most likely to occur.

Additional Information from Local Data

The Draw the Line survey confirmed that young teens are often poorly informed about sex. For example, about half of 14-year-olds (boys and girls) believed it is illegal for youth under 16 to buy condoms (it is not). About 20% of youth age 12-14 erroneously believed that "you could tell if a person has HIV/AIDS by looking at him/her." Nearly four out of ten (39%) 14-year-old boys and half (51%) of 14-year-old girls agreed with the statement, "most teens your age are having sex," even though, as noted earlier, only a minority are.

Parents and youth give mixed reports about family communication about sex, and seem to have misperceptions about each other's attitudes and behaviors.

The National Picture

Parents in the Add Health survey tended to answer, "a moderate amount" when asked how much they had talked with their child about sex. In terms of specific topics, parents were most likely to report that they have spoken with their children about sexually transmitted diseases, and least likely to have discussed the social consequences of sex. As a general matter, parents were more likely to have spoken about various topics related to sexual activity with daughters than with sons.

Parents in the Add Health survey generally rejected numerous reasons thought to explain why they might *not* speak with their child about sex, such as feeling that they don't know enough, that the

child would be embarrassed, that it would only encourage the child to have sex, or that parents don't need to talk to their children because the children will get the information they need elsewhere. In essence, Add Health was not able to readily uncover why parents are sometimes reluctant to talk about sex and contraception with young adolescents.

Parents surveyed by Add Health also tended to be unaware of what their children were actually doing sexually — only 30% of the parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds believed their child had had sexual intercourse. This percentage was slightly higher for parents of girls (36%) than it was for parents of boys (25%).

Additional Information from Local Data

As other research has noted, youth and parents frequently disagree in their reporting of past experience with parent-child communication about sex, contraception, and pregnancy. In the California Wellness Foundation analysis, two-thirds or more (66-74%) of adolescents age 11-14 said they could speak with a parent on the three subjects, while about 90% of parents/caregivers thought their teen could speak with them. Parents were also more likely to believe that youth felt comfortable speaking with other family members about these topics than the youth themselves reported.

In this same survey, parents and youth disagreed about whether conversations had actually taken place — 41% of youth and 65% of adults said that they had had conversations about sex or birth control. They also disagreed on who started the conversations — youth said they began the conversations about half the time, while parents said that youth began the conversations only a quarter of the time.

One local data set suggests that many young adolescents have ample opportunities to have sex, and many report willingness to have sex.

Information from Local Data (no relevant national data are available)

Though not nationally representative, the Draw the Line data set contains some provocative findings regarding many young adoles-

cents' willingness to have sex, and opportunities to do so. A third of 12-year-olds reported that they had attended a party in the previous three months where no adults were in the house. By age 14, this percentage increased to 51% for boys and 42% for girls. Thirty-eight percent of 14-year-old boys and 30% of 14-year-old girls said that in the past three months they had been alone lying on a couch or bed with "someone they liked."

Many boys, and some girls, in the Draw the Line data set expressed interest in having sex "at this time in their lives." The proportion of boys who said they would have sex with someone they liked very much if they had the opportunity increased from 19% at age 12 to 42% at age 14 (comparable statistics for girls were 5% at age 12 and 8% at age 14). Thirty-six percent of 14-year-old boys and 18% of 14-year-old girls said they would consider having sex if they had a boyfriend or girlfriend they loved. About one-third of 14-year-old boys said they would have sex because of curiosity and an equal proportion said they would do so to "satisfy my sexual desires." Of those girls who would have sex if the opportunity arose, the top three reasons (of seven offered) that they would consider having sex were similar to the boys —18% would do so with a boyfriend they loved, 12% would do so to satisfy curiosity, and 12% would do so because of sexual desire.

Significant proportions of youth surveyed as part of the Draw the Line/Respect the Line evaluation perceived that people in their lives would be accepting, if not approving, of their having sex. Half of boys and a third of girls age 14 said that the majority of their friends think it's acceptable for people their age to have sex with a serious boyfriend or girlfriend. About half of 14-year-olds (boys and girls) agreed that *boys* are more popular if they have sex; 36% of boys and 20% of girls age 14 thought that *girls* are also more popular if they have sex. Virtually no girls thought their parents would approve of them having sex at this time in their lives, but by age 14, 21% of boys thought their fathers would think it was okay and 15% thought that their mothers would think it was okay.

Implications

(1) The findings presented in this report provide substantial evidence that many young adolescents are having sex. Results from all three nationally representative data sets make clear that approximately one in five young adolescents has had sex by age 15, and many have begun dating at an early age. Such facts should serve as a wake up call for parents, program leaders, school officials, community leaders and all those who work with young teens. Sexual activity and dating are important issues for middle school age youth that cannot be ignored.

(2) There is good reason to be concerned about youth who begin having sex at an early age. Youth who have sex at an early age seem to be different from those who do not, both in their sexual behavior and in other areas as well. Early first sexual experiences for girls are more likely to be unwanted, compared to girls who have sex at age 15 or older, and these first sexual relationships end more quickly. Youth age 14 and younger who are sexually experienced are much more likely than peers who have not had sex to use drugs and alcohol and to engage in delinquent behavior; that is, such behaviors often occur together. Over the longer term, girls who begin having sex at age 14 or younger will likely have more sexual partners and an increased risk of teen pregnancy, contracting an STD, and dropping out of school. Although early sexual activity in and of itself may not "cause" these outcomes, it does appear to be an early and important warning sign of risk.

(3) Parents should be concerned about their young teenagers dating, in general, and very cautious about letting their children date someone much older, in particular. One of the most striking and clear findings from this collected research is the great risk inherent in young teens dating older partners. Parents clearly need to discourage early dating, in general, as well as dating older partners specifically, both of which greatly increase the chances of having sex. Although most sexual activity among young teens is voluntary, there is evidence from small area studies that some young teens, like older teens, can get into situations where they feel sexual pressure or coercion. By virtue of their young age, however, they may be less able to handle these situations effectively than older teens. Such data suggest

that teaching middle school youth about how to resist and manage sexual pressure is appropriate. Another clear message is that supervising the social behavior of young teens remains important. Parents and other responsible adults need to know where their children are, what they are doing, and with whom. As noted earlier, one small area study found that fully one-third of 12-year-olds and almost half of 14-year-olds (51% of boys and 42% of girls) report that they have been at a party where there were no adults in the house. National data are not available on some of these issues, as noted earlier, but these smaller area findings nonetheless raise serious concerns.

(4) Parents should communicate more with their young adolescents about sex, love, and relationships. As other research has shown, not all parents are talking with their children about sex and related issues, and the California Wellness Foundation data set also suggests that even when parents report that they are talking to their children about sex, their children don't always remember having these conversations. This apparent mismatch is a clear indicator that parent-child communication needs improvement. At the same time, it's important to add that simple communication between parents and children about sex does not necessarily reduce the chances of early sexual activity. For example, recent research has highlighted the importance of overall closeness between parents and teens, more than specific discussion of sex, as being especially protective (Blum, 2002).

(5) Efforts to prevent teen pregnancy should target young adolescents. Not only do many girls become sexually active before age 15, but of those who do have sex, about one in seven becomes pregnant. These data clearly suggest that addressing sex and its consequences — as well as contraception — for both girls and boys cannot be put off until the high school years.

(6) Sex education is necessary, but not sufficient. Although the majority of youth in this age group reported receiving some sort of sex education, youth surveyed in the NLSY97 lacked a grasp of some very basic facts about reproductive biology and contraception. It may be that middle schools are not adequately covering these topics (or are not covering them at all), it may be that poor quality curricula are being used, or it may be that teens simply are not retaining what they're taught. Because there are programs that have been

proven to increase knowledge about these issues, as well as to decrease early sexual activity (Kirby, 2001; Sociometrics, 2002), middle schools should consider adopting such curricula or similar ones.

Nonetheless, as the National Campaign has long argued, it requires more than classroom-based curricula alone to make major reductions in teen pregnancy and related problems. Families, faith leaders and communities generally are also powerful influences on adolescents, and they all need to help teach and guide young people about sexuality. Schools cannot and probably should not do it alone.

(7) **We still have much to learn**. Finally, the seven analyses in this report also show how much we ***don't*** know about sexual activity in this age group. Although it is clear that far too many young people are engaged in risky sexual behavior, a more complete picture eludes us. This is partly because objections are often raised to research that asks young people sensitive questions about their sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

There are several reasons that help explain this queasiness. Some parents, school officials and community leaders are not certain that it is appropriate to ask young adolescents, in particular, direct questions about sexual activity. Some worry that asking such questions "legitimizes" the behavior or will increase teens' interest in engaging in it. Compounding this are some methodological problems of studying the issue. For example, young teens may not necessarily understand the terms typically used in surveys. In order to get reliable data, investigators may therefore need to use very explicit language, language that parents, school officials, and others may find offensive. These sensitivities need to be discussed and resolved openly and respectfully in order to find ways of learning more about young teens. Absent such information, we are all limited in our ability to provide sound guidance and advice — not only about preventing teen pregnancy, but about sex, love, and relationships generally.

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